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ABSTRACT

Writing does more than demonstrate the interpretive process active in the mind of a student, it influences and directs the interpretive process in writing. Writing to read allows the expressive dimension to find an overt, secure place in the interpretive framework of a student's learning. By examining a student's theoretical explanation of her response to Andrea Lee's "Sarah Phillips," a short novel about a young black woman growing up in the 1970s, this process is clearly revealed. The student's marginal comments, reflections, and drafts changed the way the student saw her own responses to the text by helping her to find the "speculative instruments" with which to name her developing interpretations. In this way, writing can transform reading by making it a conscious symbolic process of discovering strategies and forms. As readers confront experience in texts, they exercise the primary act of mind by symbolizing it--writing illustrates and contributes to the transformational character of that symbolization. Standing alone, neither reading to write nor writing to read completes this creative process of interpretation. Teachers should nurture the interconnectedness of reading and writing with their responses to students' works, illustrating and modeling this symbiosis with responses focusing on interpretation rather than structure. (MM)

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ABSTRACT

Writing does more than demonstrate the interpretive process having gone on in the mind of a student; it influences and directs the interpretive process in writing. This paper explores the limitations of the ways in which reading and writing have been taught in schools and argues that writing about texts can enhance the interpretive process in reading. Using a case study of a student's work in interpreting a novel, the paper shows how marginal comments, reflections, and drafts change the way the student sees her own responses to the text by helping her to find the "speculative instruments" with which to name her developing interpretations.

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Writing to Read: The Shape of Interpretation

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In our questions lie our principles of analysis, SuzanneLanger tells us. So the questions we ask about the relationship between reading texts and writing them contain premises within them that shape the answers we provide. Mariolina Salvatori asks how reading literature and writing about it can function together in a program of learning. Frank Smith asks how writing might express the world readers create for themselves as they read literature. Ann Berthoff asks how the study of literature can help generate and formulate questions about language as a symbolic form. The questions are directed by a principle of interaction between the processes of reading and writing; an interaction that draws almost a one to one correspondence between the acts, and sets a uni-directional course for students. Students read, then write. Or they read so that they are able to write. This paper asks another question, the mirror of Berthoff's: how do questions about language as a symbolic form shape the study of literature? Trading positions of the terms in Berthoff's question alters the principles underlying the question, the principles of similarity and chronology.

One reason writing teachers have stressed the similarity between reading literature and writing is to help students recognize the active nature of the reading processs, something we assume they already recognize about the inescapably physically active nature of the writing process. If students realize that they hypothesize, invent, and revise in reading (activities they know they accomplish in writing), they will be less likely to engage in a discouraging hunt for the "right" map of the text they read, and more likely to interpret the text effectively. The reading process itself must be made

conscious to students for them to become powerful interpreters, and analogy with the conscious writing process seems an effective pedagogical, as well as theoretical, strategy. But reading is seen as prior, if not primary. In writing courses with literature anthologies required, reading is the fuel that fires student writing throughout the process of reading, making decisions, and providing a record--usually in an academic essay--of the process having gone on. Reading is presumed before any transfer to writing when students explore subject matter the literary text presents (most common) or imitate the forms of the literary text in sonnet, short story or play (least common); or in an organic recapitulation of form follow the text's patterns and rhetorical manipulations in their own strategies of interpretation (not very common). With any of these situations, we assume that if a student reads, she'll become adept at interpreting her thoughts on paper. The reading, in other words, controls the writing.

The premise underlying the questions today about what the act of writing does for the interpretive process in reading literature is that the sequence of read to write doesn't explore the reading and writing relationship provocatively enough. Lucy Calkins and Donald Graves, who've worked with young children's literacy development, have shown how students can learn to write before they read, and use their writing experiences to develop ideas about reading. In their classrooms, these teacher-researchers approach the reading-writing connection with writing as the frame of reference, suggesting ways in which the teaching of writing can influence the teaching of reading. But Calkins finds that many teachers at primary levels, who are usually trained in reading, make the reading-writing link by inserting writing into the reading program, and thus writing seems to TAKE AWAY from reading time. School techniques for integrating the two

processes show writing to be an afterthought to reading: -"Read a tall tale, now write one. Or "get to page 26, close your book, write what you think will happen to the donkey." Writing responses to reading or imitating an author's style are other common post-reading activities. But this kind of interconnectedness, Calkins argues, enhances students' enjoyment or power in neither activity, for students often end up disliking not only the interrruptive writing task, but the interrrupted reading as well. I suspect that some of our writing/reading activites are uncomfortably like the ones Calkins describes and no doubt have much the same damaging effect on our older students.

Students at college as well as elementary levels have developed few ideas for examining the concepts that come from their reading. "They can make simple inferences" as studies such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress and the Carnegie Commission show, "but cannot return to the passage they have read to explain the interpretations they have made." To use Berthoff's conundrum, students are failing to "think about their thinking." Calkins' argument, and the one we make here, is that students learn to think about their thinking through writing, to interpret their interpretations of their reading in their written responses; locating strategies for interpreting texts, not just the text they are reading, learning lessons about learning as they experience a text.

Joyce is a student of mine at UMass, a secondary school teacher, and a graduate student completing work on her degree. Last fall, she brought in an idea she wanted to work on for her thesis; a theoretical explanation of her response to Sarah Phillips, a short novel by Andrea Lee about a young black woman growing up in the early Seventies. A young black woman herself growing up at the same time, Joyce was so puzzled by her inability to relate

to the novel that she wanted to analyze why. She's writing about the text now, using Holland's equation of identity and interpretation,and the ideas of other reader-critics, as she creates her own text about the text. Joyce's interpretation of Sarah Phillips is getting shaped and reshaped by her writing about the text, and so I want to use her as an example of how the process of interpreting literature gets fed by responding in writing.

After reading her prospectus, where she explains,"the reader is left to her devices to make the novel a whole entity in order to have workable reactions", I asked her to explain those reactions by talking about how she was feeling as she read, and she wrote in a reading journal, "The novel doesn't have closure for me. I find myself being critical of Sarah Phillips, or maybe it's Andrea Lee. I leave the novel feeling unsettled." What's unsettling? I asked. She began to explore the problemmatic nature of the event, her reading of the novel, by talking about her own upbringing, implicitly comparing her family and religious background to Sarah's: "Unlike Sarah, it was my experience to be disadvantaged, reared in a one parent household with six brothers and sisters. . . My mother graduated from high school and somehow instilled in her children to do the same.. . .We are all high school graduates except my second eldest brother. Once in the third grade, my mother allowed me to go to school during a hurricane. I didn't believe there was no school. In my rain gear, I braved the storm one block away from home. After crossing my second street alone a school custodian coming down the hill of the schoolyard informed me from his car window that the school was closed. Satisfied, I returned home to enjoy the day off. Like school, religion wasn't emphasized either, since Ma rarely went to church. My mother's parent were Baptists, but my mother attended Catholic school for many years. Still, she favored the Baptist religion. thus most of

my religious teachings have a Baptist influence. However, in Savannah, we children spent a lot of time with Aunt Celestine who is a Seventh-day Adventist. Whenever Ant Sulla was around, you had to go to church." Telling her own story, Joyce also finds the elements she wants to highlight in her interpretation of the novel, the ambiguous family relationships in the Phillips family, especially between mother and daughter, and the ambivalence Sarah feels about religion as the skeptical daughter of a famous civil rights minister.

Ann Berthoff tells us that philosophy is the search for one's speculative instruments, the ideas that help thinkers make relationships, create meanings. Joyce is conducting such a search through her writing, locating the ways she interprets her interpretations, parleys her associations into concepts that shape her thinking about the literary text. Writing is helping Joyce find the speculative instruments with which she can name her dissatisifaction. The speculative instruments here require Joyce to make use of dissimilarity in the processes of reading and writing, take advantage of the slowed-down, conscious, nature of what she does when she writes that helps guide what she does, quickly and unconsciously, as she reads. Writing helps Joyce avoid what Culler calls "premature foreclosure--the unseemly rush from word to world". As the writer of her own text and the co-composer of Andrea Lee's, she becomes both spectator and participant, interpreting, hearing herself interpret, and interpreting again based on what she hears, consciously developing the analogy between reading literary signs and "reading" other areas of experience.

In this process of transforming the symbolic activity of interpreting a literary text, Joyce has made lots of marginal comments on her text and Andrea Lee's. Marginal comments are really questions, and really writing--

esoteric shorthand though much of it may be. The form of the marginal comment is propositional, associative and metaphorical. We write comments to explore the forms of texts and to translate those forms to others. We write in order to remember ourselves interpreting what we read. And the shape of that interpreting consists of the questions we have, arguments we make, associations we develop. Looking at my own marginal comments on Sarah Phillips, I read myself constantly juxtaposing; her ideas to others who remind me of her, her ideas to mine. The form I write in--the questions I pose to myself about what I'm reading--clearly show me my own disposition to what she says--the shape, in other words, that my interpretation is taking. But students, who don't have to interpret to others--or who aren't conscious of that role--may not look at their marginalia as interpretive strategies. Joyce's initial question in her prospectus was "how does reader reponse theory help a reader interpret Sarah Phillips?" But after writing, she altered her question to "why do I have a negative reaction to this novel?" The marginal comments help her hear her real question. "Unbelievable that she is so silent to her ma." "What is her problem?" "I find this hard to take, living in Paris with two men."

The marginal comment shows how writing does more than illustrate the interpretive process in reading, it directs it; occurs not only after negotiation with a text, but before it and within it. Calkins talks about "envisaging" the productive question in writing. The word "envisaging" seems significant to me. It's a word of shape, not just sight. The places where Joyce stops to comment or to highlight are the sites of interpretive possibility, the often sudden joining of expectation and embodiment; in Iser's terms the point at which structured act meets textual structure. Her writing marks the course of her interpretation and the forms it will take, as one

point of departure or delay invokes another stop of the same kind, in an envisaging of her questions. Of course, the marginal comment is not the only way that writing energizes literary interpretation. Calkins advocates a learning log, where students write, read, and react in a series of cumulative steps. Berthoff's dialectical notebook forces writing to become the scene of symbolic interaction between experience and reflection. The academic essay or the imitative form can become the way students enter the world of the ltierary text. Joyce's autobiographical explanation of frustration took on not only subject matter similar to the novel, but the same flavor, the same evocative, nostalgic style--even down to sentence length and structure--as the piece she was responding to. Joyce's writing helps her learn how she responds to the forms of the narrative she reads and how the forms she writes in herself shape what she has to say.

For Kenneth Burke, the forms of literature are the avenues for interpretation. Readers respond through the forms, anticipating and becoming gratified by the sequence of elements in a text. "form in literature", Burke attests, "is the arousing and fulfilling of desire." Writing directs and highlights the places where our desire is aroused in a text, where we anticipate sequence or movement, where we are temporarily frustrated or unfulfilled by a delay in the gratfication of our formal needs. Joyce's responses in notes and marginal comments express her long-deferred desire that was never gratified by the forms of the novel. Her own narrative doesn't fit Sarah Phillips, and she wanted it to. Interpreting through her writing, Joyce's frustration is abating because she is naming the form her frustration takes in the text. And she is developing implicit notions about how the form of literature works to engage the interpretive powers of the

reader as her writing adopts the patterns and voice of the novel itself, and comments on both texts--her own and Lee's. This kind of generative imitation and response is Joyce's form of identification with the novel, in the Burkean sense of the term; her realization that she is both a part of and separate from the experience she interprets.

The important element in any of the writing activities illustrated here briefly, marginal comment or learning log or associative response, is that they nurture the expressive aim, which underlies all writing. One reason I think expressive discourse may be underlying or prior is that it's writing characterized by the question. It relishes the risk, the encounter. The writer carries within no fear of being reprimanded by some "other" for tentativeness or speculation: tentativeness and speculation are the very tenets of the discourse, which help formulate the productive questions to guide interpretation. Our acknowledgment of the expressive function is crucial then, I think, to making writing enhance literary interpretation. Students write from the expressive aim when they first react to a text, uncertainly creating the shapes they imagine. The energy generated from these reactions drives the interpretive process. Collecting their reactions to reading and responses to reactions, students proceed through a text, the one they read and those they write, building energy incrementally.

Writing to read allows the expressive dimension to find an overt, secure place in the interpretive framework of a student's learning, and that's important. If Britton is right, the primary motive for language is not communicative. It is instead self-communing--fulfilling a need to transform experience through symbolic means. Polanyi has put it like this: "In every act of knowing, there enters a passionate contribution of the person knowing what is being known." As readers confront experience in texts, they exercise

the primary act of mind by symbolizing it. Writing illustrates and contributes to the transformational character of that symbolization, recognizes the "passionate contribution." Suzanne Langer notes that Freud made philosophers realize "that human behavior is not only a food-getting strategy; but also a language; that every move is also a gesture." Writing provokes this sort of awareness: moves in texts and in reactions to texts are gestures; they are the symbolizations of interpretations within forms.

Though I've talked about how writing transforms reading by making it a conscious symbolic process of discovering strategies and forms, the truth is that just as read to write doesn't complete the creative process of interpretation, write to read doesn't either. Interconnectedness is truly that, students write, read, write and read what they write, write what they've read, write what they don't know and read what they know. One way we can nurture this symbiosis is in the reponses we make to the forms of our students' work. The way we read student writing is exactly the way we teach by example students to read literary texts. And the assumptions that guide our questions in student texts are sometimes the very ones we try to rescue students from in their own reading of literature: that interpretation should search for the right answer, that reading has little to do with the responder, that it has everything to do with the textual structure. Our marginal comments, or our end of text notes, illustrate and model this "anti-literate" view of interpretation when responses concentrate on a text's deficiencies or deviations, or when the tone condescends, even while it praises. Our responses should serve as markers to help us interpret our students' literature and as guides to help students reinterpret their texts as they read our interpretations.

Calkins is talking to teachers when she says that we'd all rather write literature than write about it. Students, too, need to believe that they do more than write about literature in their English classes. If students read themselves writing literature, then the interconnectedness of form and meaning, reading and writing, question and response, become speculative instruments to know the word and the world. Every time a human being reach out across or by means of symbols, to the world, Norman Holland says, that individual "reenacts the principles that define the mingling of self and other." As students write and read literature, they learn lessons about self and other which put them at the passionate center of the interpretive act.

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